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Joint Inspection Unit

Review of travel arrangements within the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Review of travel arrangements within the United Nations system" (JIU/REP/2010/2).

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Summary

The Joint Inspection Unit report entitled "Review of travel arrangements within the United Nations system" (JIU/REP/2010/2) examines the management of travel services within agencies of the United Nations system and proposes actions that agencies can take to improve their efficiency and effectiveness.

The present report presents the views of United Nations system organizations on the recommendations provided in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit. The views of the system have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by organizations members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. Agencies of the United Nations system welcomed the report and generally accepted its recommendations. While agencies suggested that some of the recommendations could have been improved through a more in-depth financial analysis, they expressed appreciation for the wide-ranging nature of the report, which covered areas as diverse as, inter alia, participation in the inter-agency travel networks, the expansion of the travel modules of the enterprise resource planning systems and recovery for fraudulent travel claims.

I. Introduction

1. The Report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Review of travel arrangements within the United Nations system" (JIU/REP/2010/2) examines the travel policies and practices of the United Nations system organizations with a view to improving services and reducing travel costs. The report explores, inter alia, the role of the inter-agency network of travel managers and the use of the enterprise resource planning system in the management of travel arrangements and the processing of travel claims.

II. General comments

2. The members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) commended the Joint Inspection Unit for having produced a very clear, comprehensive and constructive report on the practices of travel offices across the United Nations system. Agencies considered that many of the conclusions were practical and merited further consideration.

3. Agencies suggested that some of the recommendations could have been improved through a more in-depth and supportive financial analysis, which would have permitted a fuller understanding of the basis for any proposed improved efficiency or cost savings. This was particularly the case with respect to the International Organization for Migration and International Monetary Fund models for the procurement of travel services (see paras. 43-50). An understanding of the travel volumes necessary to deliver the benefits of pursuing those models would be welcomed. Agencies noted that some of the conclusions were based upon findings of non-United Nations organizations whose travel entitlements did not conform to those set out in the United Nations Staff Regulations and Rules; this should have been clarified in the report wherever relevant.

III. Specific comments or recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should support the activities of the Inter-Agency Travel Network through the attendance and active participation of their respective travel managers at its annual meetings and encourage the adoption of the Network statutes stating its goals, objectives and procedures.

4. Many CEB members indicated that they actively participated in the Inter-Agency Travel Network and therefore supported this recommendation. They took note of the goals and objectives of the inter-agency group and welcomed it as a source of information that allowed for benchmarking and the sharing of best practices.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of the organizations members of the International Organizations of Geneva (IOG) should consider the creation and financing of

two positions for the IOG working groups on joint airline negotiations and travel agency/visa processing services through estimated cost avoidance savings in order to improve service quality and efficiency.

5. CEB members noted that this recommendation was of interest only to organizations based in Geneva. Organizations with headquarters in that city expressed support for the idea of exploring a joint mechanism that could improve services and efficiency. Those organizations noted the need for further investigation into the funding mechanism required to support this model and the concept (and benefits) of the "neutrality/impartiality" of the proposed mechanism identified in the report (para. 25).

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should ensure, where this has not already been done, the exploitation of all available options to revise and upgrade their enterprise resource planning system travel modules.

6. Agencies agreed with this recommendation, with many reporting that activities targeted at improving the travel functionality of their enterprise resource planning systems were either in progress or planned. They noted that the better travel planning achieved through these systems was also an objective of their cost reduction and greening initiatives.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should ensure that information on travel policies (including entitlements and procedures) is updated and made easily available to staff.

7. Organizations strongly supported this recommendation, with most reporting that efforts to disseminate travel information were already in place. Agencies indicated that, through the creation and maintenance of Intranet websites, they were able to circulate information about updated entitlements, policies and administrative procedures. Some also reported that they had conducted training sessions for travel arrangers and senior manages.

Recommendation 5

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should ensure the inclusion, in the travel arrangements workflow, of provisions for the staff member to indicate, thereby assuming responsibility, that he or she has undertaken the required security training and requested security clearances, obtained medical clearance for travel when applicable, requested the required visas and possesses a valid United Nations laissez-passer, should such requirements not be in place.

8. CEB members generally supported this recommendation, although many indicated that it might take some time to incorporate verification processes for security, medical and other travel requirements into existing workflows. Such a delay would result primarily from the need to embed those processes into existing enterprise resource planning systems, an activity requiring careful planning and thorough testing.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations and other international organizations using a city as a gateway for travel should reach agreement to jointly negotiate for preferential airfares, if they have not already done so.

9. Agencies generally supported this recommendation, with many noting that the practice was already common in some locations, in particular New York, Montreal, Canada, and Rome. Agencies at other locations indicated a willingness to participate in joint negotiations, provided that such agreements could lead to measurable advantages.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should incorporate procedures accepting self-certification of travel as authorized, for those travel claims for which no additional funds have been requested by the traveller.

10. CEB members generally agreed with and supported the recommendation to include self-certification procedures within the overall travel claim processing framework; many had already incorporated such practices. However, some agencies, in particular smaller ones with relatively modest travel needs, suggested that the financial return might not cover the expenses associated with implementing the recommendation.

Recommendation 8

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should strengthen procedures, if this has not already been done, imposing severe penalties for cases of fraudulent travel claims.

11. Agencies agreed with this recommendation and reported that they had implemented a variety of procedures for recovering unwarranted travel expenses. In addition, in line with the recommendation, agencies had issued administrative circulars and utilized Intranets to increase awareness regarding institutional practices concerning fraud, including with respect to travel.

Recommendation 9

The governing bodies of United Nations system organizations should request the executive heads to provide reports on travel expenditures by reporting period and steps taken to rationalize travel costs.

12. While agencies generally accepted the obligation to report on travel expenses to governing bodies, they noted the importance of first establishing clear and common benchmarks that could guide member States' decision-making, especially since the travel process included many variables that could change over time, such as fares, number of journeys and destinations. Such changes could make year-to-year comparisons very difficult. In addition, agencies noted that an isolated review of travel expenditure would have limited value unless it related to the activities giving rise to the travel, thereby providing context for any review. Some agencies noted that more comprehensive travel reporting might require the enhancement of existing or planned enterprise resource planning applications. Finally, agencies

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suggested that not all travel expenditure needed to be reported to the governing body, citing as an example donor-mandated travel charged directly to donor-funded projects.